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House Votes To Cut Off Covert Aid

228-to-195 Tally Is Setback to Reagan Nicaragua Policy

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The House, in a partisan rebuke to President Reagan's policies in Central America, voted last night to cut off further covert U.S. aid to rebels fighting the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The 228-to-195 vote, which followed one of the most intense, emotional foreign policy debates in Congress since the end of the Vietnam war, was a political blow to the Reagan administration's 19-month-old "secret war" against the Sandinistas.

Split largely along party lines, the vote put the Democratic majority in the House—and, to a large extent, the Democratic Party—on the record in firm opposition to the president.

But it was highly uncertain whether the House action would lead to a cutoff of CIA support for the guerrillas challenging the Sandinistas.

The Republican-controlled Senate is considered unlikely to accept the House action. And if it were somehow approved by the Senate, Republican leaders predicted that it would be vetoed by Reagan.

Soon after the House vote late last night, Reagan administration officials said the government remains committed to continuing the covert operation in Nicaragua unless it is clearly forbidden to do so by Congress. They expressed confidence that the House action would be overturned in the Senate.

One official also confirmed that some CIA officials had objected to a plan by CIA Director William J. Casey to significantly expand the covert operation in Nicaragua and support as many as 15,000 anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

The official said these CIA officers had "gone along" with Casey on the formal recommendation while secretly warning some congressmen of opposition to the plan by those in the CIA who said they feared it could draw Cuban troops into the fighting in Nicaragua.

House members were told just before their final series of votes on the covert operation last night that CBS News had reported these "deep divisions within the CIA's clandestine operations directorate over plans to expand covert paramilitary

operations against Nicaragua." A White House official immediately called Casey to ask whether it was true, according to sources. Casey reportedly said that all the senior officials in the agency had signed off on the proposal to expand covert aid.

The legislation approved by the House last night would replace the covert support for the anti-Sandinista rebels with \$80 million of "overt" or open aid to friendly nations in Central America to help stop shipments of arms to leftist insurgents.

In order to protect U.S.-supported guerrillas already in the field, the cutoff of covert aid would take not effect until a secret date between now and Oct. 1, the end of this fiscal year. A ban on such aid is also contained in a secret intelligence authorization bill for the 1984 fiscal year pending before the House.

Reagan and senior administration officials were on the telephone last night in an unsuccessful attempt to swing the vote their way. Democratic leaders of the House, led by Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.), made their own face-to-face appeals on the floor. O'Neill said shortly after the vote that it "responds to the will of the American people."

His winning majority was made up of 210 Democrats and 18 Republicans, while 145 Republicans and 50 Democrats voted with Reagan.

O'Neill and other Democrats had been saying for several days that a series of revelations about administration actions in Central America, including news of plans for exercises of U.S. naval, air and ground forces of unprecedented size near Nicaragua, had dramatically increased congressional concern about Reagan's policies in the region.

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